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STATEMENT BY THE INTERNATIONAL CATHOLIC CHILD BUREAU
TO THE UNICEF EXECUTIVE BOARD

Sexual exploitation of children

Background

1. The incidence of children in prostitution, though illegal in virtually every country of the world, is a profitable $5 billion dollar industry. It is often poor children, particularly girls and young women, who are the victims of the lurid sex industry or "flesh trade". 1/ While exact figures are unavailable, conservative estimates indicate that 1 million children, mostly young women, are forced into the sex markets of the world every year. 2/

2. "Children in prostitution" refers to the sexual exploitation of a child for remuneration in cash or gifts. It is usually organized by an intermediary, for example, an agent, pimp or procurer. Children at very young ages are tricked, kidnapped or simply sold into brothels and their families are without legal resources to rescue them. In addition, many children are working in high-risk occupations on the streets or as domestic servants in potentially exploitative situations.

3. The roots for this horrific phenomenon are multiple and complex: poverty, unfair development strategies, rapid urbanization, the breakdown of the family, gender inequality, domestic child abuse and lack of access to education. Sexual exploitation negatively affects the physical, psychological, social, spiritual and cognitive development of children in so far as:

(a) Sexual exploitation jeopardizes the health of children and places an additional strain on scarce resources. It is another dangerous vehicle for the spread of the deadly AIDS virus;

(b) Sexual exploitation is particularly harmful for girls and young women who are denied an opportunity to develop the skills necessary for more productive and dignified roles in society and who are stigmatized if and when they are fortunate enough to escape.

4. Sexual exploitation also weakens the fabric of communities and societies. It fragments families, creates social disorder and destroys the chances of many children and young women to become future productive members of society.

Recommendations for UNICEF

5. UNICEF is taking concrete steps to end this harmful scourge and alleviate its deleterious effects on children. Forty-four per cent of the national programmes of action developed to reach the goal adopted at the World Summit for Children include reference to activities dealing with sexual exploitation and abuse.

6. UNICEF has an excellent opportunity to take a leadership role and strengthen the linkages among the non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the Government and UNICEF. Below are some examples of cooperative efforts with some recommendations for future action:

(a) Worldwide, NGOs, sometimes with UNICEF support, are developing initiatives to prevent the sexual exploitation of children. For example, the Kamala project in Thailand provides prevencive education at the community level. A number of preventive actions are supported by the UNICEF Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean, including parenting courses and a review of legal reforms related to the abuse and exploitation of children. UNICEF could provide further financial support and technical assistance to local NGOs that are aiming to prevent the sexual exploitation of children;

(b) UNICEF could increase support for training programmes and public awareness campaigns designed for social workers, law enforcement agents, the judicial system and the public. The International Catholic Child Bureau (ICCB), in cooperation with UNICEF, serves as a consultant to the End Child Prostitution in Asian Tourism Campaign (ECPAT), which is engaged in reducing the Western demand for sex tourism;

(c) UNICEF can continue to support legal reform to protect children and urge the implementation of all the provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which currently has been ratified by over 155 States parties. For example, UNICEF has cooperated with the African Network for the Prevention and Protection Against Child Abuse to hold subregional seminars on exploitation and legal reforms in Dakar.

7. The Convention on the Rights of the Child, as well as the national programmes of action, provide a framework for policy change in favour of sexually exploited children. ICCB urges UNICEF to increase its effort with Governments and NGOs to develop policies and programmes in support of the sexually exploited child.

8. The time has come to put an end to this crime against humanity. As Ron O'Grady, the coordinator of the ECPAT Campaign explains: "The time has come for concerted action ... to create the necessary moral outrage that will change attitudes, pass new laws and enforce existing legislation. No society can go on destroying children in such large numbers". 3/

Notes

1/ International Commission of Jurists, as quoted in ICCB News.

2/ United Nations Working Group on Slavery, 1989, as quoted in Facts Have Faces.

3/ Ron O'Grady, New Zealand, Coordinator of ECPAT, ibid.